

**Joint Information Hearing of the
Senate Select Committee on Family, Child and Youth Development
Senate Committee on Health and Human Service
and Senate Committee on Education**

“Childhood Obesity and the Role of California’s Schools”

TESTIMONY

By

MARILYN BRIGGS, R.D., M.S.

**Director, Nutrition Services Division,
Assistant Superintendent of Public Instruction
California Department of Education**

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Chairpersons and Committee Members:

Thank you for scheduling this time to hear our concerns and recommendations for improving the health, nutrition, and academic performance of California's children. Previous speakers have been sharing with you the growing concern over the environmental risk factors that are contributing to childhood obesity. The California Department of Education (CDE) is committed to providing leadership and working together with our partners to act on behalf of our children to improve the school health environment. We believe we must act now to prevent long-term health risks for children, reduce long-term economic cost, and improve the quality of life for our children.

My testimony will include the following:

- ?? A brief background of the Department's child nutrition programs;
- ?? The results of California's leadership role in establishing mandated nutrition standards for reimbursable meals served through the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) school nutrition programs; and
- ?? An overview of the policy actions recommended by the September 2000 Healthy School Environment Policy and Community Action Summit that could significantly improve the school health environment.

School nutrition programs have a rich and interesting history that has evolved throughout the last century. They provide a safety net to ensure that all children receive the nourishing food they need to learn and grow. In fact, the vision statement of the early pioneers of this program still applies today:

All children will have access to healthy meals, provided in an attractive environment, served by caring, well-trained personnel, and will grow through this experience to have healthy food habits for a lifetime.

However, the twenty-first century challenge that these pioneers surely did not envision is the current competition for student food purchases and the expanding commercial food environment.

Currently, the Department's Nutrition Services Division administers nutrition programs providing over four million meals daily so that California children are better prepared to learn and to achieve their full potential. An outline of the nutrition programs we administer, including distribution of over 2.5 million cases of USDA commodities per year, is included.

California has been a leader in establishing nutrition standards to ensure that meals served through the USDA's National School Lunch and School Breakfast Programs are consistent with recommended dietary allowances and dietary guidelines. In 1989, we worked with Senator Jackie Speier, then an Assembly

member, to establish legislation requiring nutrition standards for all food and beverages available on school campuses. The resulting nutrition standards were the first in the nation and provided a model for federal standards adopted in 1994 as part of USDA's School Meals Initiative for Healthy Children.

Implementation of these standards at the national level has made a difference in school meals offered to the 27 million children participating in USDA's school nutrition programs daily. This month, USDA announced that data from two recent studies demonstrate that school meals now include greater menu variety, more fruits and vegetables, and a decrease in total fat and saturated fat content. A copy of the USDA press release is in your folder, and charts summarizing the study are attached (Exhibits 5, 16, 22, 24, and 28).

Also in your folder, you will see the results of a 1998 survey of California's school districts describing the improvement in the quality of school lunches served to children in this state. For example, one of the federal nutrition standards is that meals must meet 30 percent or less of calories from fat over a week. We recently analyzed data collected from California school districts as part of a required evaluation of success in meeting these standards. We found that the average percentage of calories from fat in the California school lunches tested decreased from approximately 38 percent before the standards were in place to an average of 30.5 percent currently.

This success was achieved through a Department partnership effort with school districts to pilot test strategies to improve the food choices available through USDA's meal programs. This program, *Shaping Health as Partners in Education*, which is known as SHAPE California, is currently being implemented by 93 California school districts in over 912 participating school sites. The SHAPE California program uses a comprehensive approach to provide quality meal service, promote nutrition education, develop and apply nutrition policies, and build partnerships with the community.

The recent *California High School Fast Food Survey*, conducted by California Project LEAN, found that school reimbursable meals were not the problem. Unfortunately, establishing nutrition standards for other foods and beverages sold throughout the school campus remains a challenge. Growing concern exists regarding the long-term impact of the escalating availability of low-nutrient, high-calorie foods in schools. Research demonstrates that the food choices available in a child's environment are a key component in effective nutrition education.

To address this problem, CDE cooperated last September with the California Elected Women's Association for Education and Research, known as CEWAER, to convene over 700 school administrators, superintendents, educators, legislators, child nutrition sponsors, food policy advocates, parents, and youth representatives. The goal of this Summit was to develop new strategies for the implementation of a seamless network of school, community, state, and national

policies to create a healthier environment in our public schools. As a result of the Summit, more than 40 agencies and organizations have joined as partners in a new coalition to continue to guide change. This coalition is known as the California Children's Coalition for Activity and Nutrition (CCCAN).

The recommendations that resulted from the Summit have been combined into the proposed **California Children's Health and Achievement Initiative** and the initial draft outlining the initiative is in your folder. Most critical of all of the recommendations is a consensus that a comprehensive approach involving schools, health agencies, communities, agriculture, the media, and state and federal programs is essential to improving the health and academic performance of California's children. The initiative contains three key elements:

- ?? **Healthy Food for All Children** to address the critical, current economic challenge in school nutrition programs.
- ?? **School and Community Grants** to fund innovative nutrition and physical activity strategies; and
- ?? **Administration, Oversight, and Evaluation** to improve nutrition and physical activity through a coordinated school health system.

As a representative of CDE, I will be focusing on the first element. The CCCAN Coalition achieved consensus among the partners that this element is a first priority, critical to making an effective change in the school nutrition environment. The bottom line is that schools cannot continue to provide nutritious, safe, and appealing meals to our school children at the current level of funding.

School nutrition programs are facing increasing constraints and challenges as a self-sustaining business, in addition to meeting the nutritional needs of children. The charts in your folder document the problem. For example, you will see in Chart 3 that in the ten-year period between the 1989/90 and 1999/2000 school year, the increasing **federal** reimbursement rates compared favorably with the rising Consumer Price Index (CPI), increasing from \$1.55 to \$1.99 per meal. However, the **state** meal reimbursement rate was not adjusted to reflect the changes in CPI and remained in a range from eleven to thirteen cents reimbursement for free- and reduced-priced meals. When the state meal reimbursement began in 1976/77, all school meals were reimbursed. In 1981, the reimbursement was reduced so that schools only received the state reimbursement based on the number of meals served to children eligible according to the federal definition for free- and reduced-priced meals.

The consequence of this under-funding has resulted in an increasing financial burden for nutrition programs. As you can see from Chart 2, in 1989/90 school districts were contributing 41 cents per meal. By 1999/2000, their cost to provide meals to their students more than doubled, increasing to 92 cents per meal. The current state reimbursement rate of 12.68 cents for each free and reduced-priced meal served is insufficient to cover current food service costs. Some schools are

compensating for the lack of funds by increasing the school meal price (which may further reduce participation) and/or increasing the sale of foods other than USDA reimbursable meals.

Increased state funding for school meals is critical to sustain the nutritious meal program. This will also reduce the financial pressure on school food service programs, resulting in a decreased emphasis on competitive foods that are higher in sugar, fat, and total calories, yet low in essential nutrients.

I want to acknowledge the interest of Senator Escutia on this issue, and to compliment her and the bill's cosponsors for the hard work they have done on Senate Bill (SB) 19. This legislation acknowledges that there needs to be an increase in school meal reimbursement rates, and the Department looks forward to working with her to address language and budget details.

Specifically, we support CCCAN's proposal to address this critical need by:

1. A reinstatement of the state meal reimbursement for all children.
2. A ten-cent increase in reimbursement for all meals and snacks to make up for cost of living increases and increasing food service costs, particularly labor and energy costs.
3. Reimbursement of another ten cents for each breakfast, lunch, and after-school snack to provide schools with the funds needed to increase the amounts of fruits and vegetables served, with preference given to California-grown produce. Nutrition research documents that increased intake of fruits and vegetables typically results in reducing total fat and calories and increasing fiber in the diet. This increase in fruits and vegetables will be reinforced through our collaborative efforts with our agriculture and health partners in the 5 a Day Program.
4. Quality-improvement funding to school districts to help them enhance their nutrition programs. For example, by providing nutrition education in the classroom and cafeteria, including teacher training and educational materials; funding a nutrition education specialist position; establishing and/or maintaining school gardens; providing food service education and training; purchasing food service equipment; and/or marketing the benefits of child nutrition programs. Quality-improvement funding would be based on total federal and state reimbursement received, possibly ten percent, as an incentive for school districts to promote access to reimbursable meals.

In the CCCAN draft initiative, school districts that receive the funds listed above would be required to:

- ?? Ensure that all food and beverages sold on school campuses shall be under the management of the school nutrition department; and

- ?? Adopt, implement, and enforce a nutrition policy based upon established guidelines in *"Fit, Healthy, and Ready to Learn: A School Health Policy Guide"* developed by the National Association of State Boards of Education. A copy of these guidelines is in your folder. At a minimum, this policy shall address nutrition standards for all food and beverage sales consistent with the most current California Daily Food Guide and federal regulations; adequate time for students to consume nutritious school meals; food and beverage commercial advertising; a comprehensive, sequential nutrition education program linking classroom instruction with a school environment that models healthy food choices; food safety standards; professional development standards for food service staff and teachers; and parent and community involvement.

We also support the other requests under this element of the draft initiative, including:

- ?? Funding for local agencies to start-up and/or expand after-school snack and/or summer lunch programs that are consistent with defined nutritional standards. These agencies include non-profit agencies such as park and recreation agencies, Boys & Girls Clubs, and other community groups;
- ?? Implementation and expansion of "direct certification," a federal option that greatly simplifies the eligibility process to qualify low-income children for free- and reduced-priced meal participation; and
- ?? State funding for Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) Farmers' Markets that may be matched by federal funds.

Under the second element of the CCCAN draft initiative, **School and Community Grants**:

- ?? We support the request for funds to establish coordinated school health innovative awards for the development and/or expansion of innovative nutrition education and physical activity programs, including school gardens that integrate nutrition education into the school curriculum. This request is aligned with provisions in Senator Escutia's SB 19 bill.
- ?? CDE also supports funds to increase the ability of existing, successful community-based and after-school programs (non-profits and local government agencies) to provide nutrition education, physical activity, and meal/snack programs that support healthy food choices.
- ?? We support a joint statewide marketing campaign targeting pre-Kindergarten through grade twelve to promote healthy eating and physical activity. To be most effective and truly comprehensive, this campaign would be a coordinated effort of the Departments of Education, Health Services, and Food and Agriculture to encourage behavior change among California youth and their families.

In regard to the third and final element of the CCCAN draft initiative, **Administration, Oversight, and Evaluation**, the Department strongly supports the implementation of the coordinated school health model for pre-Kindergarten through grade 12 as recommended in the recently released *Building Infrastructures for Coordinated School Health: California's Blueprint*. I encourage you to review this document that is in your folder since it represents the umbrella under which we initiate all our actions to improve students' health and strengthen the support of the school environment to bring about behavior changes that result in healthier lifestyles.

- ?? A high priority request under this element is to fund a physical activity specialist position within Department of Education to coordinate physical activity programs for children pre-Kindergarten through grade 12 and support physical education in after-school and child development programs. This position would restore state level oversight and enforcement for physical education that has not been in place for more than 10 years. Funding is also needed to provide physical education training to elementary teachers (both generalists and physical education specialists), along with middle school and high school teachers. The reality is that the State has an outstanding physical education framework but we do not have adequate training of teachers.
- ?? To support the coordinated school health model, we also support CCCAN's recommendation to provide funding for the School Health Connections office to act as a liaison to the Department of Food and Agriculture and coordinate health, education, and agriculture programs and information disseminated to schools, local government, and communities. In addition, the Coalition is recommending funding to place a county-level health coordinator, a nutrition education specialist, and a physical education specialist in each county to work with child and youth health councils and school districts to promote coordinated school health.
- ?? We support funding for the expansion of three existing CAL-PRO-NET Centers to provide the necessary statewide training of food service personnel who prepare and serve school meals and snacks. This funding will enable community colleges statewide to assist in providing the consistent, timely, and effective training necessary for the preparation and service of safe, appealing, and nutritious school meals.
- ?? We also support funding for regional nutrition education specialists in each of the eleven Superintendent regions of the state to provide the coordination and technical assistance critical to meeting regional needs and ensuring the integration of nutrition education with the healthy food choices available on the school campus.
- ?? We support funding to administer CDE's Healthy Kids Survey and Fitness Gram and to fund coordination in the design, collection, assessment, and dissemination of survey data with the *California Children's Healthy Eating Practices Survey* (CalCHEEPS) and the *California Teen Eating, Exercise and Nutrition Survey* (CALTEENS). Through these combined efforts, we can

maintain the necessary surveillance of children's food and beverage consumption, physical activity competencies, and other health behaviors that can guide future program planning and use of resources.

We recognize that this is a substantial investment and believe it is an investment that will save Californians billions of dollars in future health-related costs, as documented in the recent California Research Bureau report *Overweight Kids: Why Should We Care?* We also recognize that money alone will not solve the problem; quick fixes will not solve the problem; and schools alone will not solve the problem. However, we believe that the school does have a key role in the community to model healthy behaviors and provide children with the education they need to learn about and establish healthy lifestyles.

As you have heard today, we must act now. The alarming state of our children's health is a multifaceted, complex issue. The CCCAN Coalition represents an unprecedented group of partners who are engaged and ready to be a part of the solution. We believe that we can make a difference in California with a comprehensive approach that provides vision, leadership, and commitment of resources, involving community, county, and state partners. We have a unique opportunity to bring agriculture, health, and education experts together to address the childhood obesity epidemic. California can lead the way in establishing twenty-first century schools that play a key role in improving our children's health.

I appreciate the opportunity to present this testimony.